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Roland Barthes' *On Racine*: on the Deathbed of the Author?

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Abstract

The Author died in Paris in 1967 by the hand of Roland Barthes, in his (in)famous essay “The Death of the Author”. The outcry following this tragic decease was immense; critics were mourning and cursing Barthes to damnation for his audacity to kill such an important figure. Many would argue that this had everything to do with the spirit of the time: *les événements*, intellectual revolts and student protests in France in May 1968, given that the essay was only then first published in France. Yet, this is a misconception: Barthes published ‘The Death of the Author’ one year earlier in *Aspen*, an American magazine. More so, it may be argued that this death certificate of The Author was merely an epitome, something that was about to be foreseen and based on ideas that sprouted earlier in Barthes’ career. As I want to argue, the roots of the death of the author can be traced back to *On Racine*, published as early as 1963, perhaps his metaphorical deathbed. Later publications in between 1963 and 1967 should thus show the slow moribundity of the Author. In this paper, I want to explore the progression of the death of the Author, beginning with *On Racine* and ending with ‘The Death of the Author’; the genesis of the idea should be traceable throughout Barthes’ earlier publications.

“He who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die”

Oscar Wilde, ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’

The Author died in Paris in 1967, but perhaps his death was already anticipated earlier on. He had not been feeling so well for the last couple of years and his health declined without any chances of recovery. Possibly, a French doctor already made a diagnosis that would predict the Author’s death, in 1963. This doctor going by the name of Roland Barthes cleverly unearthed a new form of criticism, which ultimately would prove a cancerous tumour in the heart of the author that would become the death sentence for the Author in the fullness of time. The newfangled diagnosis: *Nouvelle Critique*. The Author’s hand was no longer fully controlled by his brain and he started to become unable to control the meaning of the words that he voiced. His childhood friends, like Mallarmé and Proust, had already abandoned him before he got diagnosed with the terminal illness that would lead up to his extirpation.

Hope for revival, for resurrection from the grave was possible only after his diagnostician Barthes deceased. However, the Author would not be able to return in the full ornament and glory of his days of yore, the Romantic era. On his deathbed the Author lay, from 1963 till 1967 when his oncologist Barthes decided to pull the plug and let the Author die, perhaps in pain and with great sorrow to some. Barthes, as any scientist who discovers a new diagnosis, described the moribundity over due time in a number of select publications. Voices had been raised that Barthes had no idea what he was doing and rivals, such as Raymond Picard, claimed him to be a fraud, only with the intent to serve his own purposes. His new method was considered faulty and in direct conflict with the old academic methods of Picard and his

¹ I want to express my sincere gratitude to prof. dr. Jürgen Pieters for reviewing my article and providing helpful insights and corrections wherever needed.

peers. Debates ran high and Barthes' method was put under scrutiny. Successful counterattacks in successive publications by Barthes himself assured his status and made him a more than respected figure. Nevertheless, the Author died... Did Barthes indeed already give up on the Author in 1963, or did he only do so later on, after first trying to keep him alive in some way or another?

In this paper, I want to explore the progression of the death of the Author, beginning with *On Racine*, which Roland Barthes published in 1963. In this work, he expresses his idea of regarding the literary work as an autonomous object, to be looked at without the interference of worldly interpretations. By implication that means the author, perhaps for the first time, was theoretically put outside of his own work; in other words, the author became no longer part of his own creation. Later, in 1967, Barthes published the essay 'The Death of the Author', in which the Author was not only put aside, but also more or less 'murdered'. Specifically, I want to take a deeper look at how Barthes constructs the image of the author Racine – in *On Racine* – and compare that to Barthes' later publications – *Criticism and Truth*, the essay 'The Two Criticisms' in *Critical Essays*, and 'The Death of the Author', where he constructs author images of modernists like the already mentioned Mallarmé and Proust; is there a similarity between these conceptions and if so, can we regard upon *On Racine* as anticipating what Barthes was only to fully put to words in 'The Death of the Author'? In exploring this premise, I will also provide a tour d'horizon of the debate between 'Old' and Nouvelle Critique, in order to pinpoint the main differences in perception of the author by both movements, which should enlighten the broader perspective of Barthes' *On Racine*, and by extension the genesis of the fundamental idea of the death of the author.

GUIDING THE AUTHOR TO HIS DEATHBED

You will remember how Plato, in his project for a Republic, deals with writers. In the interests of the community, he denies them the right to dwell therein. [...] Since Plato the question of the writer's right to exist has not often been raised with the same emphasis [...]

Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*

All beginnings are difficult; Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' has, to say at the least, unclear, maybe even obscure origins. Molly Nesbit (1987) explains in her article 'What Was an Author?' the particular publication history of Barthes' text. Contrary to the public idea, 'The Death of the Author' was first published in 1967, in *Aspen* nos. 5+6 an American magazine, one year before its publication in France, in *Mantéia V*. It would not be strange, if it were not that *Aspen* was kept in a white box and represented the advanced modern culture, with contributions from Marcel Duchamp, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Robert Rauschenberg, Hans Richter and Samuel Beckett. So Barthes' essay is boxed in, between "twenty-eight pieces, nothing more than a pamphlet stuck between movies, records, diagrams, cardboard cut-outs, and advertisements" (Nesbit 1987:241). Despite these many 'big' authors, the magazine partially focused on the denial of old-style authorship. However, this was not the magazine's only goal, as it also tried to define modern form:

[*Aspen*] exposes modern form as a complex of machinery, marketing, impersonality, rationality, power, and scientific truth; it takes these materials over and tries to work with them; it beautifies and on occasion mimics the practices of the non-cultural zones. It asserts its own position as a cultural product tentatively engaged with a larger, uncultured but technologically sophisticated world. The box shows how authors, including modernists, can do critical work. (Nesbit 1987:243)

So far Barthes' essay seems in place, it is critical work. Yet, in contrast with the other contributions (see Nesbit (1987) for a detailed overview), it is out of place: *Aspen* shows a modern form, which drives Barthes away; while *Aspen* showed that modernists, including authors, can do critical work, Barthes reacted against authors, and by extent all artists, who try to claim any position in culture. He does not develop a new kind of science with regard to language or literature, but instead pursues the idea of authorless literature: this new modern impersonality and scientific objectivity that *Aspen* defended, could only lead to Barthes euthanizing the author; the newfound impersonality of the time became the death of the author.

At the time 'The Death of the Author' was written, as Burke (1998:21) explains, Barthes was also busy preparing another publication, namely *S/Z* (1970); an extremely fine detailed, microscopic even, analysis of 'Sarrasine', a short story by Balzac. In this analysis the perspective of the author would be completely erased by the perspective of the reader; the reader in a way becomes the author of the text. It is not surprising that 'The Death of the Author' had to predate this text; otherwise Barthes wouldn't have had a theoretical foundation for this analysis.

Criticism has not treated this essay kindly: in the following years critics would vehemently respond to Barthes, attacking him for killing the author, however without much attention to the actual details of the essay or reference to any of the arguments of 'The Death of the Author': examples can be found in Gass (1984) and Keefer (1995) – one could say perhaps cowardly written after Barthes was unable to respond. Keefer (1995:78) does not value 'The Death of the Author' as a highly important event when he says: "Reports of the death of the author have been greatly exaggerated". He cannot see past the paradox in which Barthes, after his actual death (and I also think during his life) has become the Author he himself claimed to have died in his essay; the men who Keefer appropriately calls the 'Four Henchmen of the Authorial Apocalypse' (Barthes, Derrida De Man and Foucault) are given a god-like status, thus becoming the object they denounced so heavily.

Keefer (1995) clearly does not believe in the author's death; however it seems throughout his article that he has no regard for the innovative aspect for Barthes; he is simply annoyed by the denouncement of the Author as an imperative entity. Besides that, there is a difference to be made between the metaphorical author and the physical writer Barthes, which is perhaps the main point; the writer does not die, the author dies in the text; ergo he should simply not be visible in his work, a critical distinction Keefer fails or refuses to see. Nevertheless it cannot be said that the general idea of Barthes' essay – which Keefer and others he mentions in his paper have misunderstood – has not been important.

William Gass (1984) - not providing a very detailed analysis of his article - is in certain aspects quite similar to Picard²: his paper contains rather personal attacks and despite making claims on certain inconsistencies (which are to some extent correct), Gass himself is nothing better, writing an essay which does not hold much objective claims and is inconsistent in his own right. Gass (1984:11) considers the removal of the author as a "social and political gesture, not an aesthetic one"³. This refers to a popular misconception, regarding the

² See infra 'The Quarrel'

³ See Hix, Harvey. "Morte D'Author: An Autopsy." *The Iowa Review* 17.1 (1987): 131-50. Print. for a detailed analysis of the opposition between Barthes' and Gass' ideas regarding the death of the author.

publication date of Barthes' essay. Many believe the climate of the time (*les événements*, intellectual revolts and student protests in France in May 1968) to be fundamental for Barthes' statement, which however is less true. Seeing as he wrote his essay in 1967, yet only published it in France in 1968, the unrests did, at least, not fully influence him, yet proved a dramatic and suitable background for his idea. It would be unwise to say that revolutionary social order had no impact at all, but the inception of 'The Death of the Author' can be traced back to as far as 1963⁴, as I want to show in what follows, with the publication of *On Racine*.

On Racine is Barthes' first structuralist analysis of an author, or rather his works, in which he focuses on a text-immanent approach, where using Lacanian psychoanalysis (which is in itself structuralist), Barthes attempts to create a 'Racinian anthropology':

[...] the analysis presented here is not concerned with Racine at all, but only with the Racinian hero: it avoids inferring from the work to the author and from the author to the work; it is deliberately a closed analysis: I have put myself in Racine's tragic world and tried to describe its population (...), without reference to any source in this world (to be found, for instance, in history or biography). What I have attempted to reconstruct a kind of Racinian anthropology, both structural and psychoanalytic: structural in content, because tragedy is here treated as a system of unities ('figures') and functions; psychoanalytic in form, because only an approach ready to acknowledge the fear of the world, as I believe psychoanalysis is, seems to me suitable for dealing with the image of man confined. (Barthes 1963:vii-viii)

This opening paragraph clearly shows that Barthes is avoiding *auteurism*: the interpretations of Racine's plays should not be linked with the biographical events in his life, or with any historical events that may have occurred at the time the plays were put to paper. Yet, at least according to me, this passage already contains a problematic and perhaps contradictory idea: the use of psychoanalysis. My problem with Barthes using psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework is twofold: psychoanalysis, if seen as a mental concept, is pro factum an outer-world source and not suitable for his text-immanent approach; yet, if we conceive of psychoanalysis as a theory – carefully defined in its own literature – to explain given behaviour inside every human being, thus also in fictional creations, (as they are based upon mankind) it seems to be less problematic, as this can be seen as a means of intertextuality. However, one would have to acknowledge a certain degree of self-reflection of the author in his characters in order to use psychoanalysis, which again is in conflict with Barthes' own

⁴ Perhaps arguably even to 1953, with the publication of *Writing Degree Zero* (Barthes' first publication) although after examining the literature, I find the evidence to substantiate this would be significantly less conclusive than the arguments that can be made in regard to *On Racine* (1963). As Allen (2003:9-24) notes in *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes still believes in the author: "Authors exist and make their choices within language. More importantly, they exist within literary language which has pre-existing forms, conventions, genres and codes. [...] All authors create their works out of a struggle with the already established language of literature". That the writer is indeed still of much importance to Barthes is visible from the opening paragraphs:

Hébert, the revolutionary, never began a number of his news-sheet *Le Père Duchêne* without introducing a sprinkling of obscenities. These improprieties had no real meaning, but they had significance. In what way? In that they expressed a whole revolutionary situation. Now here is an example of a mode of writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language, which is both History and the stand we take in it. (Barthes 1984:3)

statement. Yet without a theoretical framework, there are no grounds for any kind of analysis, so perhaps this is a necessary paradox.

Literary criticism should not occupy itself by trying to work out what the author meant or how the text relates to the author, as writing, for Barthes (1963:ix), is “to jeopardize the meaning of the world, to put an *indirect* question that the writer, by an ultimate abstention, refrains from answering”. There is an infinite possibility of answers; each separate reader gives a different (or even multiple answers) through his own history, language and freedom. The author is not yet completely absent here, however, clearly Barthes does not value him as highly important to the process of interpretation as would have been the case in ‘Critique Universitaire’.

Barthes talks of the ‘fatal duplicity’ of the writer and the critic, both of which are needed in order to speak about the plays of Racine today: “In short, the fatal duplicity of the writer, who asks when he appears to be answering, must correspond to the duplicity of the critic, who answers under cover of an interrogation” (Barthes 1963:ix). There is still a part to be played by the author here, yet it is not a grateful one: he is merely a scribe who uses a form to ask a question without offering the answer; the answer has to be filled in by the reader or critic. This implies that whatever might have been written by the author – his ‘intentions’, insofar as he can be said to have them – are of no importance when trying to interpret a literary work. The latter is significant as Barthes (1963:ix) only regards “works that designate a meaning in question” and to which “the world must answer [it]’s question assertively, must endow with its own substance the meaning proposed” are qualified to be subject to interpretation.

Notwithstanding this statement of intent, Barthes seems to stray from his own definitions throughout his work, specifically in ‘I. Racinian Man’. The perhaps most striking observation throughout this first of three essays, is that Barthes does not seem to leave much room open to interpretation. While he claims that multiple interpretations of a work are possible, that different answers can be given to the question(s) the book proposes, he himself constantly makes use of literary strategies to show that his interpretation is valid, but at the same time this also make his interpretation conclusive, as if it might be the only correct answer. With phrases such as ‘I merely observe ...’ (9), ‘here reality is always ambiguous, ...’ (15), ‘The Racinian Eros expresses itself only through a recital, ...’, ‘Imagination is always retrospective, ...’ (17), ‘it is this doubling which constitutes all Racinian erotics, ...’ (23), etc., it seems like Barthes is giving decisive answers, not just one interpretation amongst many. Then there is also the troubling and ambiguous use of the name ‘Racine’. It is unclear in what sense Barthes is using this name: (a) is it a hypernym and does it serve to enclose all of Racine’s plays or (b) is it simply used as the name for the author himself. If the latter is the case, Barthes defies his own statement of intent from the foreword. There are instances throughout this first essay that serve (a), e.g. “Racine’s theatre is not a theatre of love”, and others that serve (b), e.g. “Racine specified that the apparent motives of a conflict (...) are illusory” (Barthes 1963:25); sometimes even within the same page, as these examples show.

There are even instances where Barthes goes fully out of his way to refer to Racine’s life: “We know the importance of ingratitude in Racine’s life” (Barthes 1963:26), whereupon an interpretation is linked to the author’s biography⁵: a clear violation of his own intentions. This

⁵ Other examples include: “Racine himself seems to have experienced the world (except during his last two years) as opinion: he made his way only by the attention of the Great, and explicitly wrote only to receive that attention” (Barthes 1963:35).

reminds of sociological analyses like those by Lucien Goldmann, with his structure of forces; generalizations based on sociology are used to explain certain character traits; yet again, in this case this causes conflict. Sociology refers to outer-world real human behaviour, which is then mapped onto fictional characters, therefore it essentially refers to something outside the text, which Barthes claimed he would not do.

In the third essay/chapter of *On Racine*, Barthes explains what is wrong with contemporary Racinian criticism. The main point has been examined earlier in this paper (cf. supra I): critique universitaire versus nouvelle critique. Barthes reiterates his frustration with the focus on history and biography of the 'old' critics:

Although our scholarly criticism (...) still remains, [...], loyal to the (organic, not structural) notion of *genesis*, it so happens that Racinian exegesis tends to deal with Racine precisely as a system of significations. From what viewpoint? That of allegory (...). [...] Racinian criticism does not discuss whether it might not be more interesting to study allegorical language as a phenomenon of the period than to examine the probability of this or that key [= historical or biographical allegory]. What we retain is simply this: the work is regarded as the *language* of something, here a certain political fact, there Racine himself. The trouble is that decipherment of an unknown language for which there is no document analogous to the Rosetta stone is literally improbable, unless we resort to psychological postulates. (Barthes 1963:163-64)

Obviously this conflicts with what Barthes did in the first essay. Should we see his references to Racine as investigations in allegorical language, or simply as 'mistakes'? I would say that this is open for further debate and I will not try to make a conclusive argument about it here. It is difficult to say to what extent this matters if we want to regard upon *On Racine* as the deathbed of the Author. The critical reception has shown and used some of these inconsistencies to argue against Barthes' new method of interpretation (cf. Picard)⁶.

"It is as if Racine constructed his entire theatre on this model, [...], the peripeteia, and only afterwards invested it with what is called psychology" (Barthes 1963:42). This one is especially hard to ignore, given that it seems that Barthes here is handing back to the author the power of intention/meaning, which he took away in the foreword.

Besides referring to Racine himself, Barthes also – yet seldom – makes references to the outer world as for example when he discusses 'Racinian division' and links it to a Christian idea: see Barthes (1963:36). There are plenty of places where metaphors of 'Father and Son', 'Good and Evil', 'God' are being employed by Barthes: these might also in conflict with his statement of intent, but I do not want to use these instances as arguments, since I believe a valid claim can be made that these are intertextual references to The Holy Script, in which case it would not be a violation to his own ideas. However, it can at least be said that these are cases dubious uses of language (which might be one of the grand definers of Barthes language after all).

⁶ The problem with the critical reception of *On Racine* is perhaps the same as with that of 'The Death of the Author', as discussed by Burke (1998:21):

On the one hand, its dictates have been accepted unreflectively, and recourse to Barthes will be used to 'argue' the death of the author without the arguments proposed in the seven pages of his essay being themselves held up to any critical scrutiny. On the other hand, and just as unfortunately, 'The Death of the Author' has seldom provoked more than derisory dismissal

In an interview for *Le Figaro littéraire* (14-20 October, 1965) Barthes discusses Picard's claim that he used biographical criticism himself, and rejects it. His answer to the question is not a true answer: Barthes tries to make a distinction between his 'biographical claims' and those Picard uses. However, his argument is very limited and seems not to be able to uphold itself:

But it is not the same thing to say, 'Orestes is Racine at twenty-six,' and to mention that Racine made a habit of a certain ingratitude, a widespread character trait which appears in known events of his life and makes possible such a statement as: 'The importance of ingratitude in the life of Racine is well known.' What could all people who are twenty-six years old have in common? That's a prime example of the kind of biographical criticism that establishes a systematic relation between the author's life and his work. New psychological theories⁷ challenge this kind of explication, which certain academics are still using. (Barthes 1981:39)⁸

from its opponents. Critics who have passionately contested its thesis have rarely so much as disturbed its smooth surface.

Similarly, it is my humble opinion that perhaps *On Racine* has been used to either contest or defend Barthes' statements, without any real critical investigation of his arguments made. As we can observe in Picard (1965), attacks are rather personally-based and without much grounded, objective criticism – with the exception of the mentioning some of Barthes' inconsistencies, which I listed earlier – while defenders of Barthes seem to accept whatever he has written without much critical scrutiny. A historical example can be found in a contemporary of Barthes and Picard: an article called *Roland Barthes and the Nouvelle Critique* by Funt (1968), and a more current example can be found in, paradoxically, Burke who uses *On Racine* to argue that this is Barthes' first step towards non-'man-and-the-work analyses', but he is yet not further critically engaged with the work, which – as I pointed out – contains some major inconsistencies in that specific area. Culler (2001) also discusses *On Racine* in his introductory book to Roland Barthes, but also does not seem all too critical; he fails to point at the inconsistencies of the book as well.

I am aware that there might be critical analyses of Barthes' text that have dealt in more detail with these conflicts, however I believe them to be scarce as I did not come across any during my research and – I deduce this from Burke (1998), whose research will have been much deeper and more profound than mine – if one of the most 'famous' literary theoretical essays of all time has not been held up to 'any' critical scrutiny (Burke's words), it is perhaps also possible to a certain extent that *On Racine*, a much less popular publication, has escaped from being critically analysed, with the exception of being publically scolded (cf. infra 'The Quarrel').

⁷ Barthes does not explicitly mention what these new psychological theories are; it is not unthinkable he is referring to Lacan and Kristeva. However, this is just hypothetical, as Barthes does not expand on this himself. Perhaps a look into the notes from the interviewer might clear this up.

⁸ I wondered if the obscurity and rather vagueness of Barthes' response was perhaps due to a loose translation of the original French interview; therefore I looked up the original wording:

Mais ce n'est pas la même chose de dire: 'Oreste, c'est Racine à vingt-six ans', et de rappeler que Racine a pratiqué une certaine ingratitude, trait de caractère fort répandue, qui transparaît dans des expériences connues et rend possible une constatation du genre: 'On sait l'importance de l'ingratitude dans la vie de Racine.' Mais qu'y a-t-il de commun entre tous les gens qui ont vingt-six ans? C'est le type même de la critique biographique qui établit une relation systématique entre l'œuvre et la vie de l'auteur. Les nouvelles psychologies

This statement is to say at least obscure: I fail to see this ‘clear’ difference between both quotes in Barthes’ response. If it explains this one quote by Barthes himself, it does not justify other interpretations in *On Racine* (see my earlier examples), which rather clearly are at the very least partially biographically based.

Despite these internal conflicts, I still think that Barthes’ arguments for opposing biographical interpretations are valid. These essays overall form a conclusive statement against the interpretation methods of the old criticism, without completely writing off the importance of the author, which is still somewhere present in his work. It is perhaps of this presence, that we cannot regard *On Racine* as a full precursor to ‘The Death of the Author’, but we could see its essays as the sheets of the Author’s deathbed.

In *Criticism and Truth* (1966), the follow-up of *On Racine* – its defensive theoretical complement against the ‘critical’ attacks of Picard and others – Barthes’ statement of intent towards how we should deal with the author is clearer and more coherent than in his earlier text. In this work “(...), Barthes reiterated his desire for a more systematic approach to literature [...], declaring that a science of discourse could only be established if literary analysis took language rather than authors as the starting-point of its enquiry” (Burke 1998:20). This text, only written one year before ‘The Death of the Author’, might be considered the true precursor of the latter.

Although in *Criticism and Truth* Barthes’ main interest is the language of criticism, here too the presence of the author seems to fade into oblivion; the author as an entity controlling language disappears and “becomes a void around which an infinitely transformed discourse is woven” (Barthes 1966:xix). The most interesting part of this pamphlet for my present purposes is the section ‘The Science of Literature’, in which Barthes doubts the notion of the author as guarantor of the meaning of the work. Yet, this is not a new feature, this message was already implicated in the strategy of *On Racine*, which – even with its analytical imperfections – suggested at least a similar idea of the author not being the entity that controls meaning, as in its actual analysis Barthes (in general) did not rely on the author to distil meaning from the texts.

But in *Criticism and Truth* Barthes takes this idea one step further: the origins of the work are mythologised, as the real inception of the work is untraceable. The author is the origin of the physical work, but the meaning(s) is beyond his intention and functions on a level of human and mythological⁹ significance, beyond and outside of the author. Here we have the first mention of the death of the author:

Even more: we are asked to wait until the author is dead so that we can treat him with ‘objectivity’; a strange reversal indeed: it is at the very moment when the work

interdisent ce genre d’explication dont se servent encore certains universitaires. (Barthes 1981:42, *Le grain de la voix. Entretiens 1962-1980*. Editions du Seuil, Paris)

As can be derived from the quote, the French is not any less obscure than is the English translation of the interview; so that leaves the doubt in place on how this response legitimises Barthes’ use of biographical elements in his analysis.

⁹ Barthes explains myth as follows: “‘The myth is discourse which seems not to have any true emitter who would be responsible for the content and claim the meaning: it is thus enigmatic” (L. Sebag, “Le Mythe: Code et Message”, *Temps modernes*, March 1965)’ (Barthes 1966:42).

becomes mythical that we are supposed to regard it as a precise phenomenon. Death has another significance: it renders unreal the author's signature and transforms the work into myth: the truth contained in anecdotes completely fails to catch up with the truth embodied in the symbols. [...] And we are right, for we refuse thus to allow the dead to hold the living in their grip, we free the work from the constraints of intention, we rediscover the mythological trembling of meanings. By erasing the author's signature, death founds the truth of the work, which is enigma. (Barthes 1966:30)

Through the (metaphorical?)¹⁰ death of the author it becomes possible to free the work from its constrictive chains of meaning and set it free to be interpreted as the reader, any reader seems fit, as long as the given meaning is “capable of being accepted by the symbolic logic of humankind, just as sentences in French are *accepted* by the “linguistic feeling” of the French [not my italics]” (Barthes 1966:31-32). This idea shows profound echo's with what will later occur in ‘The Death of the Author’, with that exception that Barthes still recognises the author here as part of the writing process, but no longer as the authority that provides meaning to the text.

This is quite a turn in the different direction of what we could still read in ‘The Two Criticisms’, from *Critical Essays*, published only two years earlier, where the author is still much more present, which can even be seen already in the ‘Preface’ to the book, where Barthes discusses how the meaning of a text is created: “For the meaning of a work (or of a text) cannot be created by the work alone; the author never produces anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them” (Barthes *Critical Essays* 1964:xi). What is striking, here, is that Barthes actually says and opens his book by giving the author at least very partially some power over his own writing; the author can presume meanings but it is the world (or the reader for that matter) who has to fill in the blanks, connect the dots. The task of the reader or the critic would become “the art of filling; [...], that the critic experiments with fillings, trying out on an author or a work the languages and contexts that are available” (Culler 2001:35). We find a similar phrase in *On Racine*, which suggest that even there, there is still to some extent a certain shimmering presence of the author throughout his analysis: “Let us test on Racine, by the virtue of his very silence, all the languages our century suggests” (Barthes 1963:x).

In the essay ‘The Two Criticisms’ in *Critical Essays*, we get a, perhaps vague, comparison between the canonical author Racine and a modernist, namely Proust. After *On Racine*, Barthes had still referred to Racine when necessary and to defend that specific, but otherwise he changed his focus to modernist writers, which is not surprising, since they already have the goal to try and let their work speak in its own right, with an absence of the voice of the author. In ‘The Two Criticisms’, Barthes brings Racine and Proust together:

[...]: to expend prodigies of ingenuity, rigor, and tenacity to discover whether Oreste was Racine, or whether the Baron de Charlus was the Count de Montesquiou is thereby to deny that Oreste and Charlus are essentially the terms of a functional system of figures, a system whose operation can be grasped only within the work; the homologue of Oreste is not Racine but Pyrrhus; the homologue of Charlus is not

¹⁰ The translator notes that at the time at the Sorbonne, where Barthes had studied Classical Languages, the custom still prevailed that no theses could be written on authors who were not dead yet (Barthes 1966:42).

Montesquieu but the narrator precisely insofar as the narrator *is not* Proust (Barthes "The Two Criticisms (1963)" 1964:252).

This tells us that neither Racine nor Proust, are actively involved with the meaning of their work. If the opposite were true, where the classic author would be involved with his own work, whereas the modernist author would try to write himself out of the text, this would close the gap between the canonical author and the modernist author; however now, basically, Barthes makes this into a generalisation of the author on the whole, without regard for his historical differences. It is about the system of figures, the functions of the text, the form, and the author, both baroque and modernist, has no intention of meaning, nor can he be used to distil meaning from the work. This idea leans again more towards the premises of 'The Death of the Author', yet it was written in the same year as *On Racine*, which still gave the author some credit. Interesting here would be the following quote from 'The Two Criticisms':

In short, it is the work which is its own model; its truth is not to be sought in depth, but in extent; and if there is a relation between the author and his work (who would deny it? The work does not descend from Heaven: only positivist criticism still believes in the Muse), it is not a pointillist relation which accumulates parcellary (sic), discontinuous, and "profound" resemblances, but on the contrary a relation between the *entire* author and the *entire* work, a relation of relations, a homological not an analogical correspondence. (Barthes "The Two Criticisms (1963)" 1964:252-53)

It is as if trying to solve a puzzle, of which the pieces are scattered through time and space. Strangely, it seems as if Barthes in this essay advocates a sort of relation between the author and the work, but outside of the author himself, and immanent to the work, as he clearly defends a text-immanent approach in the rest of the essay. The difficulty here might be how to interpret 'homological'¹¹: in a psychological sense that would mean behavioural characteristics that have common origins in either evolution or development, anthropologically it would be about the analogy between human beliefs, practices or artefacts owing to genetic or historical connections and sociologically, a structural 'resonance' between the different elements making up a socio-cultural whole. Either one of these interpretations could be used for a text-immanent interpretation, yet it would seem that all these possible meanings of homological still seek relations outside the work, even though Barthes would have us to have these interpretations work within the literary text itself, this nonetheless seems problematic: so does the other create these homological relations, or are they simply there because of his human nature, and the text functions still within its mythical realm? The answer is not given, or it is at least as obscure as the question; what is 'the *entire* author'? We would have had to wait for the answer until the publication of 'The Death of the Author', although the answer will not be completely satisfying, as there is no such thing as an author, as the author is the reader. If we replace 'the *entire* author' with 'the reader' or 'the critic' in the last quote, it makes sense: the reader is the author of his own interpretation of the text, therefore enters a relation with the work, which can never be analogical, and thus homological. It fits if we regard upon writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 1977:142). Writing begins when the identity of the author is lost, making interpretations and thus immanent relations possible.

¹¹ As prof. dr. Jürgen Pieters pointed out to me, the term 'homological' also reminds of Lucien Goldmann, who discusses homological relations between a work of art and a worldview/ideology.

The author has become the object of a residual antitheology, as Burke (1998:23) calls it, similar to what Nietzsche did in *The Joyful Wisdom*: the Author is dethroned from being an almighty creation that provides meaning (like God), dies and “liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law” (Barthes 1977:147). It is in the Nietzschean setting of ‘The Death of God’ that we have to read ‘The Death of the Author’: a metaphorical usurpation by man upon the Author-God, an assassination of this divine being by the reader. The Author needs to be removed, to heave up the limitation on interpretation that he imposed, to free the text from its constrictive bondages:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' - victory to the critic. (Barthes 1977:147)

If we substitute this last conceptualization of the Author, in the quote above from ‘The Two Criticisms’, things become perhaps clearer: the *entire* author is the author that needs to be found within, beneath the work, not the material author, or actually just the hand of the person who wrote down the words, seeing as Barthes (1977:146) states that:

Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, (...), that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, (...), the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.

It must be said that while Barthes is perhaps the first to actually use the words ‘The Death of the Author’, he ignores some critics and critical movements who had, at the very least, been questioning the authority of the author, like T.S. Eliot (“objective correlative”), Osip Brik and *Opoyaz*¹² and certain Prague Structuralists, only to name some. Perhaps Barthes is not killing the Author; he is creating an Author to kill, on his own misconception that ‘everyone’ worships the Author as a deity.

Notwithstanding, Barthes stresses that prior to his essay, the Author had been kept alive, but he points at some literary figures that anticipate his idea to some extent, namely Mallarmé, Valéry, the Surrealists and Proust. On the importance of Proust, Barthes (1977:144) says the following: “Proust gave modern writing its epic. By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, he made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model”. Yet, as Burke (1998:28) notes: “Barthes neglects, however, to explain why this reversal of customary literary causality should imply – or even tend toward – the diminution of the author”. Again, obscurity colours Barthes’ language, making it improbable to provide a clear answer.

But perhaps ‘The Death of the Author’ is about nothing more than one thing; devout from previous inconsistencies, internal conflicts of obscurities, perhaps in its most essential form it is about nothing more than the affirmation of and providing an open platform for the reader

¹² See Burke (1998:26)

and the critic. As was clear in *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes is obstinately advocating the place and importance of the critic in the process of interpreting a work, and in that sense 'The Death of the Author' might be the epitome, the finite text in which Barthes tries to argue the critical importance of the reader and / or the critic. The clearest example of the fact that Barthes inconsistent attitude towards the Author is problematic is in the book that followed in 1971, *S/Z*. Here he practices the principles put forward in 'The Death of the Author', while at the same time, he recalls the author:

The Author himself – that somewhat decrepit deity of the old criticism – can or could someday become a text like any other: he has only to avoid making his person the subject, the impulse, the origin, the authority, the Father, whence his work would proceed, by a channel of *expression*; he has only to see himself as a being on paper and his life as a bio-graphy (in the etymological sense of the word), a writing without referent, substance of a *connection* and not of a *filiation*: the critical undertaking (...) will then consist in *returning* the documentary figure of the author into a novelistic, irretrievable, irresponsible figure, caught up in the plural of his own text, a task whose adventure has already been recounted, not by critics, but by authors themselves, a Proust, a Jean Genet. (Barthes 1971:211-12)

The author had to die first, in order to return, although in a much 'reduced' form as Barthes would have it. So perhaps, it has never been truly about the author in the first place; of course in a sense Barthes wanted to put an end to positivist criticism, from the likes of Picard and others, and perhaps through the discussions and polemics of the time, the debate got heightened and taken to a higher level, where Barthes felt the need to up the battle through more extreme, shocking ideas, simply to deal with the old critics and got caught up in his own metaphorically, obscure 'jargon', which culminated in extremity in 'The Death of the Author'. The critic always seems to take the first place with Barthes when it comes to analysis and interpretation of the text, together with the importance of structure, forms, writing and language, which are open for discussion since there does not exist such a thing as a 'prescribed meaning'.

Perhaps an even more striking metaphor is needed to describe the moribundity of the Author. The Author can be seen as a mythological Chronos type of figure. However the Author bears a son, the Reader, and even though this son has been afraid of his father for many years, there must come a time in history where he claims his rightful throne; and so it is inevitable that the Reader will ultimately contribute to the death of his father-figure, the Author. To fully satisfy Barthes with this metaphor we could perhaps think of this metaphorical death in an Oedipal act, conform to Freudian psychoanalysis. It is perchance in this metaphor, we come closer to what Barthes did: to look upon the death of the Author not as just a denouement; there is a new heir to the throne through the Author's quietus, another form of being, the Reader, and therefore (a partly) modernization of and in literary theory. The Author has been the instance that instigated meanings, especially in positivist criticism, whether it has a factual or theological idea of the author, and this is what Barthes wished to do away with, but maybe not per se the author himself, yet the most clear and out-spoken way to face this old criticism head on was to kill the Author in 1967.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE AUTOPSY OF THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

After having dissected the Author throughout Barthes' works up to 'The Death of the Author', there are certain conclusions to be made. First of all, it is fair to say that any claim on a consistent development of the idea of the dead author is void; throughout my research I have found that Barthes' idea does sort of develop chronologically through time, yet there are certain setbacks and fast-forwards, which distort a clear linear development of his concept of the author. In Figure 1 below, I made a timeline indicating the works relevant to my study.

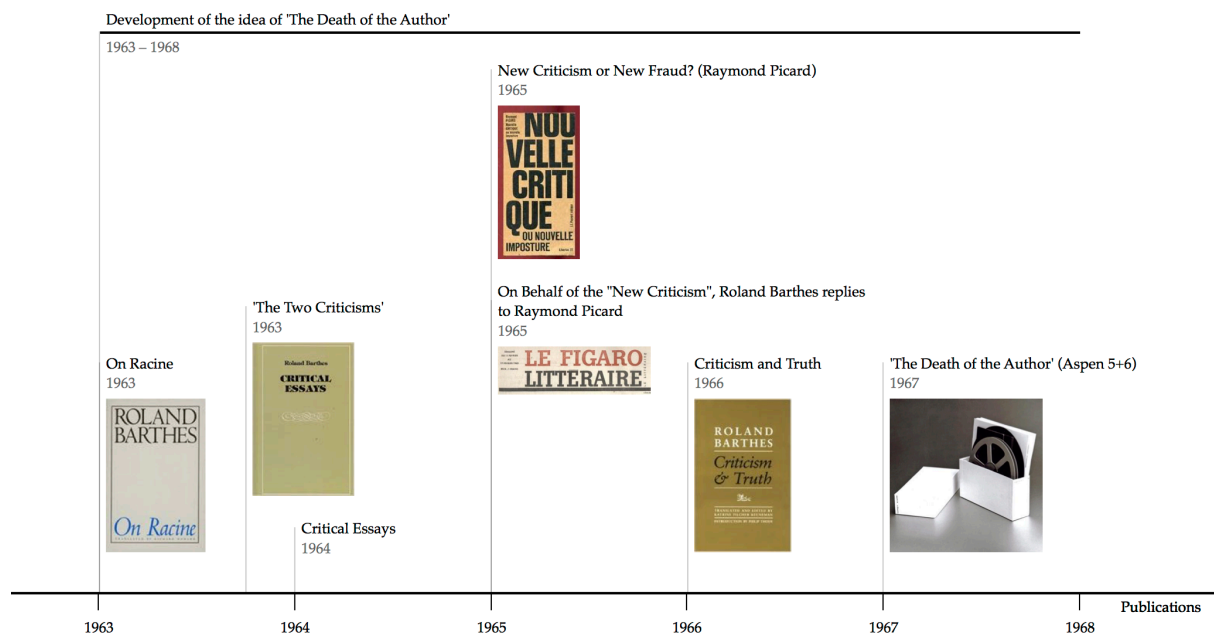


Figure 1: Timeline of Barthes' publications, relevant to the development of the idea of 'The Death of the Author'

In general, one could argue that the author fades to the background, beginning with the opening passages of *On Racine* in 1963 and the actual death of the author is fully accomplished in the eponymously essay from 1967. This would, however, be too much of a broad generalisation. From my research I discovered that at more than one instance there are inconsistencies, and too many, to speak of a simple linear progression of Barthes' idea.

Complications start when we look at *On Racine*: Barthes' opening statement suggests that he wants to study the Racinian tragedies without regard for the biography of the author and outer-world instances. Throughout my study, I hope to have shown that there are multiple instances in the work itself, which conflict with his statement of intent. Not only does he refer to Racine as an author – an issue he tries to solve in the interview from *Le Figaro Littéraire* (14-20 October 1965), without much success – he draws certain interpretations from Racine's 'personal life', refers to outer-world instances and does not leave much room for other interpretations.

Other problems arise when we take a closer look at the essay 'The Two Criticisms' (1963), published after *On Racine*. An interesting comparison arises between Racine and Proust, two writers, who couldn't be more different, yet here, through Barthes, they become the same as in the fact that they are not the essential meaning-givers of their work: an idea, which could in the sense be applied to any author; the difference (and thus importance) of the author is void,

he is not the entity that controls the meaning of his work anymore, the difference between Proust and Racine being that the latter did not actively try to already write himself out of his work. This may sound as if it is in line with the ideology of 'The Death of the Author', but this gets complicated when we read further in the essay that there is definitely a relationship between the author and his work; "a relation between the *entire* author and the *entire* work, a relation of relations, a homological not an analogical correspondence" (Barthes "The Two Criticisms (1963)" 1964:252-53). Again, a rather problematic statement, because Barthes does not define what this exactly means; at first it seems he does not want the author to have anything to do with the written text, but then makes a claim on a homological relationship between the two. It does sound paradoxical, at the very least. In the linear progression, this is troublesome; we could either regard upon this as a sort of failed succession of *On Racine*, a setback if we might, or we could take it for what it is and explain this essay with the use of Barthes later texts.

In his interview with the *Le Figaro Littéraire* from 14-20 October 1965, Barthes tries to explain how he differs from the critical approaches like the one from Picard, without much success. Barthes provides a very unclear answer as to why he refers to Racine to support a certain psychoanalytical interpretation; it is different from when Picard does something similar, but we remain in the dark as to why that might be. Can we use the author's person to interpret certain aspects or not? Is it okay when you do it under a sociological claim, but wrong when just used biographically? Muddled, we cannot seem to get a coherent picture of what Barthes has in mind and tries to explain.

Furthermore, in *Criticism and Truth* the author is the origin of the physical work, but the meaning(s) is beyond his intention and functions on a level of human and mythological significance, beyond and outside of the author. Again, this is a good reminder of what will be the main point of 'The Death of the Author', yet it conflicts with what Barthes wrote in 'The Two Criticisms', where the meaning of the work consists of presumptions of meaning of the author. It has to be said that this is not the same as the author giving meaning, but truth is that this is, at least, partially giving the author back some power.

Chronologically, we cannot say that there is a linear even development of Barthes' idea of the moribundity of the author. There is a red line to be traced throughout these works discussed above, but Barthes is not consistent with every aspect of his own thought. However, arguably the basic idea remains and is fully worked out in 'The Death of the Author'; the author becomes absent and is (in general) not used to distil meaning from the work. This idea of autonomy for the reader and the openness for interpretation (with a pre-defined framework to support the critic's interpretation) are traits, which are also visible in 'The Death of the Author'. I have done this autopsy to the best of my extent and I hope to have cleared up certain aspects with regard to this aspect in the study of Roland Barthes.

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